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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

DISTANCE EDUCATION TUTORS' PERSPECTIVES OF TUTORING

BY

DALE ANDERSON

(C)

A THESIS SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF EDUCATION
IN
ADULT AND HIGHER EDUCATION

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

FALL, 1989

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Distance Education Tutors' Perspectives of Tutoring" submitted by Dale Anderson in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education in Adult and Higher Education.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated what it means to be a distance education tutor by inquiring how and why the respondents became tutors, what tutors do, what skills and knowledge are required for tutoring, how tutoring is valued, what the tutor/learner relationships are, and what the tutor/institution relationships are. Eight practicing telephone tutors were interviewed. The interviews were transcribed and the transcripts analyzed for common topics and underlying themes.

A number of topics were identified which arose from the data. Some were related to the tutors themselves: the hiring process, the orientation process, activities involved in tutoring, frustrations and stresses of tutoring, and positive aspects of tutoring. Others were related to the learners and the institution: general characteristics of learners, learner needs, responding to learner needs, comparing distance and conventional educational institutions, concerns about the local distance education institutions, the relationship with the institution, the link between the tutors and the institution, and the tutor value to the institution.

Four underlying themes emerged from the data: tutors personally shape their own role; tutors define their own role with the learners; the tutor role is full of uncertainty; and, the tutor role involves marginal socialization.

As a result of the study, the following implications were identified: a widespread lack of understanding exists about the scope and function of the tutor role; current systems of feedback in distance education systems are inadequate for providing information related to the tutor function and performance; different types of tutoring, such as telephone or seminar, require some different types of skills and abilities to support the requisite content knowledge; and most important of all, many individuals who are directly involved in providing distance education have no personal understanding about the process itself.

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Chapter One

IDENTIFICATION OF THE PROBLEM

In the past two decades, distance education has become increasingly widespread. This growth in popularity has occurred in response to the needs of adults for individualized and decentralized educational opportunities. In Canada, entire institutions and departments within institutions provide distance education courses or programs to meet the demands of these students.

One component of distance education is the tutor. What does it mean to be a distance education tutor? The term has varying connotations. This thesis describes aspects of the tutor role from the perspective of the tutors themselves.

The first chapter contains the context of the study, the problem statement and specific questions which guided the study, the significance, assumptions, limitations and delimitations of the study, definitions of terms, and the organization of the thesis.

Context of the Problem

Holmberg (1985) stated that distance education covers various forms and levels of study which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of an

instructor and which do not occur at a fixed location; the student, however, receives the benefits of planning, guidance and tuition which the institution provides (p. 1). Too, distance education is based on some form of non-contiguous communication.

> There is, on one hand, a pre-produced course and on the other hand, systematic two-way communication between students and tutors and/or other representatives of the supporting organization that arranges the distance-study facilities. (p. 55)

Communication is the core of distance education; the representative of the supporting institution who is the source of personal communication for many distance education students is the tutor.

The Student Research Centre, Institute of Educational Technology at the British Open University (1986, p. 21) held in-depth interviews with students and staff to explore their perceptions of studying in a distance mode. Results indicated that the human dimension is critical in fostering a sense of identity with the university. Earlier, Smith and Small (1982, p. 137), Australian researchers, had stated that "it seems assured that mediation of some form between the individual learner and the impersonal study materials will always be an essential ingredient of distance education."

Tutors are an important part of distance education, providing the link between the students and the institution. Peruniak (1983) found that distance education is effective to the extent that it preserves the integrity of a human element in the system.

Problem Statement

The purpose of this study was to discover from the tutors themselves what it means to be a tutor in distance education. This description of tutors' perceptions should lead to a better understanding of the tutor role. The question was this: What does it mean to be a distance education tutor? A number of more specific questions served as guides to the research.

Research Questions

The specific questions which guided the study follow:

1. How and why did the respondents become tutors?
2. What do tutors do?
3. What skills and knowledge are required?
4. How is tutoring valued?
5. What are the tutor/learner relationships?
6. What are the tutor/institution relationships?

Significance of the Study

Tutors are an essential part of the distance education institution. They represent the major link between the institution and the student. How they see

this function should be of interest. Administrators and academic coordinators might be better able to understand the tutor role, assess the status of tutoring, and discover areas of needed improvement. This study could have significance for both current and potential tutors, as well as for current and potential students, by providing insight into the tutor-student relationship.

Assumptions

There were three major assumptions underlying this study. The first was that tutors viewed their roles in a variety of ways. The second was that tutors were able to articulate the meaning of tutoring for them. The third was that the tutors had developed an awareness of how others saw them and their multi-faceted role in an institutional setting.

Limitations of the Study

There were four limitations to this study. Since the study is based on the tutors' ability to recall thoughts, actions and impressions from the past, the tutors may have been selective about their ideas and impressions. Another relates to the ability of the interviewer to outline the study and elicit disclosure of tutors' personal meanings. A third limitation was that the respondents were volunteers and not

necessarily representative of all tutors. Further, those who chose to become involved in the study may have held stronger opinions about their tutoring than those who did not.

Delimitations of the Study

The study was delimited to eight tutors employed by a major distance education institution and living within a reasonable driving distance of the researcher. They worked for one of two coordinators in the same department, and tutored no more than two different courses. The views of these tutors reflect their experiences while working for a specific institution. Their views cannot be considered representative of tutors in other institutions.

Definition of Terms

Academic coordinator. A faculty member in the distance education institution who is reponsible for the course content and evaluation, and who supervises the tutors.

Block. A term referring to the maximum number of students in one section. Tutors are paid for each block of students that they tutor.

Role. Combination of expectations of self and others for a particular position. It is affirmed or changed over time as a result of experience in one or

more contexts.

Tutor (noun). A person who discusses course content, answers questions, provides individualized instruction and evaluates (if required).

Tutor (verb). Provide information, assistance, encouragement and evaluation to assigned students.

Organization of the Thesis

The thesis is organized in the following manner. Chapter one contains the context of the problem, the problem statement and the research questions addressed by the study, the significance of the study, and the assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and definition of terms. Chapter two reviews related literature. Chapter three presents the research design of the study. Chapter four provides an analysis of the data and the underlying themes of the data. Chapter five contains the summary, findings and implications of the study.

Chapter Two

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In this review, a number of topics are considered: the functions and activities of tutors, the qualities and skills required for tutoring, and the value of the tutors. A summary of the research completes the chapter.

Functions and Activities of Tutors

Many sources were found in which administrators, academic coordinators, and other non-tutoring personnel described their expectations of tutors in various distance education programs. Other sources provided tutors' descriptions of the reality of fulfilling that same role. Both aspects are addressed in the following sections.

Most students require support as they work their way through the materials provided by the institution. As Sewart (1982) said, "Beyond the package of materials, there is a need for individualized advice, support, interpretation and mediation capable of meeting the diverse needs of the student" (p.27). The majority of distance education institutions identified the tutor as the person to fill this individualized support role.

"Whether they interact with students by mail, by phone or in person, tutors are regarded as an important part of the communication network in most distance education systems" (Holmberg, 1974, p. 33). Although tutors perform different tasks at different institutions, the general expectation is similar; tutors usually are the means of personalizing distance delivery. Sewart (1982) related the success of a distance education system to a correct balance between the learning package and the human element. Scales (1984) agreed with Bååth's contention that the various forms of tutor-student communication were intended to support students' motivation and interest, to support and facilitate content and learning, and to assess progress.

Diversity of Role

Research indicated that tutors are expected to fill varied roles within some institutions. Coldeway (1982) of Athabasca University, stated that the distance learning tutor has a multiple function -- teacher, administrator, counsellor, facilitator, motivator, and record keeper (p. 33). Further reflecting these varied roles, Sturrock (1983) said that tutors have to be well versed in course content, in the procedures of the individual institution, in any necessary technical skills (for example, the

organization of telephone conference calls), and that they should be trained in interpersonal skills. (p. 108) In a recent report on the roles and tasks of tutors in open learning systems, Clarke, Costello and Wright (1986) stated that "the array of key competencies for tutors is formidable: current and credible subject expertise; good counselling and communication skills; availability and flexibility in working; an informed awareness of learning psychology and learning styles" (p. 63).

Forsythe (1983) de-emphasized the academic aspect of tutoring, writing that" the tutor who deals with students ceases to be master of the content and becomes the guide, mentor and catalyst to aid the students' journey through a pre-structured or open-ended learning experience" (p. 163).

At North Island College in British Columbia, four types of tutors were described -- course tutors, local tutors, general tutors and marking tutors (Tayless, 1986, p. 164). The British Open University also made use of various types of tutors: tutor-counsellors, course tutors, and fulltime staff tutors, each having different duties (Harry, 1982, p. 180).

In other institutions, tutors were assigned a singular function. At the Télé-université du Québec, tutors comprised only one of the five forms of student

support along with group discussion leaders, telephone coaches, small study groups, and self-support (Guillemet, Bédard and Landry, 1986, p.144). The tutor at NKI in Norway was described by Rekkedal (1985) as "the person who corrects, comments upon and evaluates students' papers" (p. 1).

Literature indicates that the actual functions of tutors can be very diverse in nature from institution to institution. Some serve as instructional surrogates. At the Open Learning Institute in British Columbia, tutors were described as subject specialists comparable to faculty in traditional institutions (Meakin, 1982, p. 159). Their tasks included evaluating, encouraging, clarifying, motivating, communicating (listening), building confidence, reinforcing and career advising. At Alberta's Athabasca University, Paul (1986) stated that "the primary contact people for most students are the telephone tutors ... information agent, 'pacer,' teacher, subject-matter expert, examiner and often personal counsellor to their students" (p. 140).

Where the tutor referred to in the preceding paragraph was an instructional surrogate with all the corresponding responsibilities, in other institutional schemes, the tutor was regarded simply as an agent or facilitator of learning -- a role accomplished by correspondence, telephone or the use of other types of

media. As stated in the preface to The Invisible Tutor, (Rouse, 1986), "Sam (a tutor) insisted that his students accept responsibilities as partners in the learning enterprise. He engaged them in debate not only about content but also about methods they used to learn" (p.1).

The role of the tutor has not been universally defined. Rather, it varies according to the individual institutions involved in the distance education process.

Lack of Role Definition

It seems clear that there is a range of expectation for the tutor's role within distance education, both within institutions and between institutions. Rekkedal (1985) said that "when the work of the tutors is not always appreciated by the students, this may be a result of what we consider to be the discrepancy between the value attached to this part of the correspondence study in theory, and how the tutors' role is changed in practice" (p.32). It was difficult to understand how the tutors could carry out a required role when the definition of that role had not been clarified for all who impacted on, or were affected by the tutor within the institution.

Kaye (1986) referred to one aspect of organization which might have had some bearing on the lack of

clarity. This was the inherent difference between the traditional form of education and distance education. This difference had to be understood by the administration and the faculty/staff,and incorporated into the organization of all aspects of the institution.

> The organization of distance courses is further complicated by the fact that for the most part, the people working on them adopt behavior patterns based on traditional education, which are not always appropriate to this type of education. This is particularly apparent in the approach to the teaching/learning relationship, since the basic philosophy of distance teaching and the economic reasons underlying it imply that the tutor/student relationship must never attempt to emulate the traditional teachers' relationship to a class.... Distance education is based on an indirect teaching relationship, using fundamentally self-teaching methods, the tutor acting as a catalyst to activate the skills and situations needed for self-education. (p.57)

In a fairly recent study of distance education institutions, Clarke et al. (1986) identified areas in which the tutorial role differed from the correlated role in conventional teaching. These areas were: (1) the relationship of the tutor to the course material; (2) the differences in the medium of communication, and the greater emphasis on the written word and on effective use of the telephone; (3) the infrequency of face-to-face contact; and, (4) the isolation of the tutor role. Perhaps a clear understanding of the

differences between the two types of education could benefit individuals involved in the provision of distance education.

A number of difficulties are inherent in filling a role that had not been clearly defined or supported. If, as Spronk (1988) said, "distance educators lack structured descriptions of what the tutors actually do and do not do" (p. 39), then how can these same distance educators support the individuals who perform these roles within their own institution?

It appears that tutors in Canada do not benefit from their ambiguous position within the distance education spectrum. Calvert (1986, p. 102) summarized the findings of various authors to describe aspects of the position of tutors in Canada, many of which resulted from this same lack of role definition and the unclear status that accompanies it. She stated that tutors were often isolated from their students, their institution, and one another; that, in spite of impressive academic qualifications, they tended to be part-time employees who worked for low pay with no benefits; and that, because of prepackaged learning materials, they lacked the normal functions of an academic to modify, elaborate and/or disagree with the course content. Calvert concluded that these

conditions were classic elements that could contribute to alienation from work.

Reg Melton and colleagues in the Student Research Centre (1986a), Institute of Educational Technology, at the British Open University conducted in-depth interviews about tutoring with fourteen tutors. Results indicated that tutors appeared to be exposed to the same type of isolation as distance education students, and needed both academic and moral support to function effectively and confidently and to maintain their morale.

Qualities and Skills of Tutors

The educational component is only one facet of a tutor's qualifications for the tutorial position and it relates primarily to content knowledge. What other qualities and skills are required of a tutor? A large-scale survey by Rouse (1986) to find out how adult learners at the National Extension College perceived the tutor support role concluded that different groups of students, depending upon their reasons for studying and the courses they were taking, attributed the following requirements of tutors with equal importance to possessing subject expertise: "acting as a source of encouragement and reassurance, possessing demonstrable and successful

experience in distance and open learning, providing evidence of experience in applying course-related knowledge" (p. 2). Evidence of good interpersonal skills (relating to the student and providing a facilitative atmosphere), effective communication ability (explaining and providing information), and appropriate verbal facility (pitch and quality of speech) were also deemed important due to the nature of this ongoing, non-face-to-face relationship. Miers (1986), a tutor at the British Open University for fourteen years, said that "it is not enough for tutors to demonstrate their own knowledge. Tutoring involves the ability to identify the students' understanding of course material, the students' skills and the students' grasp of the assessment criteria" (p. 7). Richards (1986), Senior Counsellor at the Open University in Wales, reported the following:

> Good tutors have a sound grasp of the course knowledge and skills and assessment criteria, and are able to combine this with the role of tutor as expert, concerned with the transmission of knowledge, particularly via remedial work and explication. (p. 24)

The great majority of personnel and students in the distance education institutions reviewed appeared to expect tutors to possess high quality skills in numerous diverse areas. These expectations were not

totally compatible with Harry's (1986) definition of distance teaching as "mediated" teaching where the tutor is only one of the identified support services available.

Tutoring as a Second Occupation.

Descriptions of distance education systems in various institutions indicate that the majority of tutors also had fulltime employment at a different location. Those same skills and qualities that allowed them to tutor on a parttime basis also enabled them to perform in separate highly-skilled occupations. In a large number of distance education organizations, those who served as tutors on a part-time basis worked concomitantly on a fulltime basis in other academic institutions. At the Japanese University of the Air, routine tutoring was conducted by parttime specialists contracted for the purpose from local institutions of higher learning (Abe, 1986, p. 147). Tutors at the Allama Iqbal Open University in Pakistan were primarily college lecturers and graduate secondary school teachers (Fleming, 1982, p.138). Part-time tutors at Everyman's University usually had full-time academic posts in other institutions; they provided face-to-face instruction in the distance education system, giving about six sessions per course (Seligman, 1986, p. 113). At the British Open University, tutorial support was

provided by part-time staff who were mostly full-time employees of other universities, polytechnics or colleges (Harry, 1986, p. 91).

Even if they were not employed elsewhere, tutors were still required to possess academic credentials or the equivalent. At Athabasca University, depending on the course, they must have a masters degree or relevant experience in a discipline closely related to the course being tutored (Shale, 1986, p. 43). Course tutors and marking tutors at North Island College need a graduate degree in the particular subject (Tayless, 1986, p. 164). Most of the 2406 tutors in the UNED (Spain) study centres were secondary teachers, lawyers, engineers or other professionals who were employed elsewhere (Popa-Lisseanu, 1986, p. 115). Tutors appear to be busy, involved individuals.

The Value of the Tutor

How important is the tutor in the distance education scheme? Robinson (1981) stated:

> We should question whether tutors are essential in a distance-learning system or merely a hangover from more traditional models of teaching and learning. After all, they are often expensive to employ, sometimes difficult to find in either the desired subjects or at the appropriate locations, and usually inexperienced in the mode of distance teaching. They also require organizing, training and supervising, all of which has connotations. (p.149)

Value of the Tutor to the Institution

Literature written since 1981 seems to strongly support the value of the tutor in the distance education system. According to Shale (1982), "the most important element in the university's academic support to students is the tutor.... They introduce a personal element into the solitude that is distance study" (p. 43). Results of Rouse's (1986) study at the National Extension College also indicated the tutor's worth. "The importance of the tutor in the learning process is clearly perceived by students and the overall satisfaction with his contribution in the process is well understood and expressed (p. 101).

Baath (1982), a recognized Swedish distance educator, wrote that "tutors play a key role in clarifying comprehension and linking course content to the student's existing framework of knowledge and experience" (p. 38). Based on in-depth interviews with students and staff to explore their perceptions of studying with the Open University, staff in the Student Research Centre at the Institute of Educational Technology (1986b) reported that tutors have a key function for students as interpreters of the meaning of the course and of what was required in its assessment. "The interpretive role seems to play

a crucial part in student learning, especially when it occurs through dialogue with students " (p. 15).

Conflicting Realities

At the same time that tutors were deemed to be valuable, two realities prevailed -- most tutors were part-time employees (as was stated earlier) and most tutors functioned within a considerable number of restraints. The first was clarified by the words of Paul (1986) as he described the current situation at Athabasca University:" These individuals [tutors], who are part-time employees of the university frequently have very little personal contact with others in the institution ... yet they are at the very heart of the delivery of its academic programme" (p. 140). The Athabasca tutors are part-time members of staff recruited throughout the province and employed under a contract that is renewed annually. They are paid on the basis of experience, the number of students assigned, and the type of course being tutored (Shale, 1982, p.43).

In contrast to the tutors who are usually employed on a part-time basis, full-time personnel are usually responsible for coordination and supervision of instruction. This situation was exemplified at the British Open University where

personal contact with the students was maintained by part-time tutor-counsellors and the coordination and supervision of tuition was the responsibility of full-time tutors who were members of faculties and responsible to Regional Directors (Harry, 1982, p. 180).

When distance education institutions are short of funding, the parttime employees are among the first to be affected. Paul (1988) supported this contention:

> A strong argument for the retention and development of student support services, including tutoring and academic advising, is thus posed....there is evidence to suggest that such institutions tend to cut these first in times of fiscal restraint. It is submitted that such cuts are based more on political factors within the institution than on data which demonstrate that they are less effective than other academic provisions in responding to the needs of distance education students. (p.50)

The following was reported in an article based on studies conducted by the Student Research Centre (1986a) related to funding at the British Open University:

> It is not surprising to note that tutors were worried about the effects of funding cuts. Cuts are seen as reducing the extent to which tutors can help students and in turn this is seen as affecting job satisfaction. Cuts also affect tutor reimbursements in a variety of ways and this in turn appears to be eroding the goodwill that tutors have available for the Open University. (p. 21)

Another result of the employment of tutors on a part-time basis is the perceived lack of status. Robinson referred to this while stating the need for the provision of training programs and support for the tutor. " Providing these is easier said than done, particularly when the tutor is not employed directly by the distance-learning system, or where perception of status is a barrier to frank communication" (1981, p. 154). Paul (1986) supported this when he stated that "tutors often feel neglected, unappreciated and politically powerless" (p. 140).

This lack of status was compounded for many tutors because the assessment tasks that they performed were not worth much in the overall assessment of the course. Studies at NKI showed that the tutor's assessment was ranked last of the following components: the text, the self-check exercises, the assignments for submission and the tutor's corrections and comments. "This low ranking of the tutor's work holds both for its instructional and for its motivational value" (Rekkedal, 1985, p. 31).

The second reality, as stated previously, is that the constraints imposed upon tutors are extensive. Guillemet, Bédard and Landry (1986) attributed this in part to the "public" aspect of evaluation in the distance mode (p.158). At the British Open

University, as at others, constraints are imposed on tutors because of the need for equity and standardization of marking. This same situation was described by Paul (1988) when he stated that tutors have little or no power to modify courses or to set exams for their courses "out of concern for maintaining the integrity of course design and protecting the academic credibility of the course through centralized examinations and marking" (p. 52).

As stated earlier, the academic qualifications for tutors are quite high. At Everyman's University in Israel, each tutor's marking was monitored and the academic responsible assessed both the marking and the advice given to the student (Seligman, 1982, p.117). Harris (1987) summed it up by saying that:

> Tutor marking is not easily controlled in distance systems, and it is reasonable to expect considerable variation in tutor practices. Academics are not used to having someone else decide the specifics of assessment criteria for them, and have reported feelings of lack of involvement. (p.86)

Value of Tutoring for Students

Learning at a distance differs from conventional learning because, in the latter, the face-to-face meeting usually provides the context for the delivery of the course; the former lacks this important component. Most distance-teaching systems tend to use

a package of self-instructional printed materials as the content base for their courses. However, the production of this standard package of material does not guarantee learning on the part of the student. According to Robinson (1982), all distance students at some time experience common problems associated with this mode of learning. These problems can be categorised as follows:

- those relating to study techniques and learning difficulties.
- those arising from an individual trying to interact with a distant and sometimes impersonal institution.
- those which are personal and affect the student's work. (p.14)

As defined by Holmberg (1986) earlier in this paper, distance education is learning which is not dependent on the physical presence of an instructor and which does not occur at a fixed location. At the same time, however, the student benefits from the planning, guidance and assistance which the institution provides, both for organizational purposes (such as setting up a program of study) and for educational purposes (related to a specific course). The Student Research Centre (1986b) at the British Open University conducted in-depth interviews with students and staff to explore their perceptions of studying in the distance mode:

> We have been struck by the very great importance to students of feeling in touch with the university, of making personal contact. For most students, studying in the distance mode has much greater significance than a process of mere credit accumulation and often represents a major development in their lives. Students see themselves as members of a university with a special character and significance. (p. 14)

The critical importance of the development of a rapport between student and institution was emphasized by several authors (Lewis, 1982; Singer, 1982). Cole et al. (1986) explained that most new students in a distance education environment base their expectations on past conventional educational experiences; an ongoing task of the university was thus to provide clarification of the new milieu, and student support for the different types of learning experiences. An Athabasca University research report (Coldeway, MacRury, and Spenser, 1980) concluded that a relationship existed between learner motivation and personal involvement with a representative of Athabasca University -- the tutor. Thus, it seemed that the human dimension of students' experience of studying with the university was crucially important in fostering a sense of identity with the university.

Value of Tutoring for Tutors

Why do tutors apply for and accept tutorial positions? Given that most have high academic

qualifications, why do they then remain in these positions which offer so little autonomy? (That is, they have little or no control over course content or evaluation.) Interviews of tutors by the Student Research Centre (1986a) at the British Open University yielded a number of reasons why individuals took on part-time tutoring at that institution -- interest in the subject being taught, keeping up-to-date in the subject area, teaching at a higher level institution, gaining experience in the educational field, and the salary. "Whatever the reasons given for taking on the job of tutoring, it was clear that job satisfaction is more important than money to most of these tutors" (p. 21). Forsythe (1983) emphasized that many became interested in tutoring as potential sources of full-time employment due to anticipated increased opportunities for instructors (p.163). Calvert (1986) identified those individuals who, through family or career considerations, were not looking for full-time employment and the rewards of classroom teaching (p.102).

It must be noted that not all distance education systems include the tutor role. At the Dutch Open University in the Netherlands, the emphasis was reported to be totally on the correspondence courses, there being no provision of tutors (de Wolf, 1986).

A wide variety of conflicting expectations and realities related to the tutor role continue to exist on a widespread basis at all levels of the sponsoring institutions. As stated by Beyth-Marom, Ellis and Ganor (1988), "Distance educators and distance education institutions are becoming more and more sensitive to students' needs.... For the sake of the students, those who support them -- their tutors -- must feel that they are supported too" (p. 106).

Summary

The literature tended to deal with a generalized definition of tutors as teachers and motivators, and highlighted the variety of expectations and specific activities which were often not consistent within or among institutions. The lack of status of the tutor function and the fact that it was a part-time position may have contributed to this lack of a clear definition of what was expected of tutors.

In this study, tutors' personal definitions of tutoring were explored to determine what meaning practicing tutors gave to tutoring. In attempting to uncover these meanings, questions concerning what they did, what they thought others expected of them, their perceived lack of status, and the realities of part-time employment were explored with the eight

respondents to address the major research question: What does it mean to be a distance education tutor?

In this way, the literature helped inform the research questions and provided a framework from which topics to be explored were identified.

Chapter Three

RESEARCH DESIGN

In this chapter, the specifics of the methodology of the study are described. First, the design of the study is outlined including the research framework, the selection of the respondents and the initial contact with them, and the data collection procedures. The pilot study, data trustworthiness, and the methods used in the analysis of data are then addressed.

Study Design

Research Framework

The design of the study is based on the interpretive paradigm in order to focus on the meanings and understandings of telephone tutors in the distance education setting. As Carr and Kemmis (1986, p. 88) state:

> Hence actions.... can only be interpreted by reference to the actor's motives, intentions or purposes in performing the action. To identify these motives and intentions correctly is to grasp the 'subjective meaning' the action has to the actor.

Recognizing that the contexts and content of the tutoring activities varied from one tutor to the next, and that the tutor's own explanations were paramount, interviewing was selected as the appropriate methodology. Transcripts of interviews were examined

for the meaning and value that the tutors gave to the activities comprising their work. It is hoped that this study will provide greater understanding of what it means to be a telephone tutor.

Selection and Contact of Respondents

In January, I contacted a provincial distance education institution for assistance in the identification of tutors to act as respondents in this study. I hoped to have all tutors in the same department with the same coordinator so that there would be some common elements in the tutoring situation. However, I was willing to encompass two departments and two coordinators, if necessary.

One coordinator who was interested in the study circulated my name and telephone number to the tutors for whom he was responsible. He described the study briefly, and asked any interested tutors to contact me. Simultaneously, I contacted a second coordinator who gave me a list of names to call. As well, I had the names of a few tutors who had been identified by my advisor and colleagues. By contacting all these individuals and seeking their willingness to participate, by the middle of April I had eight volunteers. I decided that this number would be adequate to commence the study.

At this point, I contacted each of the supportive tutors in order to set up the initial interview at a time and place convenient to them. I indicated that I would send a follow-up letter which would outline the ideas presented in the telephone call, and confirm the date and time of the interview.

Ethical considerations regarding the purpose of the study, the use to be made of the data, and the guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity were outlined during this initial telephone call and again in the letter. Tutors were also informed that sources would not be identified in any direct quotation used in the final document, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, tutors were told that they would have an opportunity to review the transcripts for meaning and intent, and to make changes as required.

Data Collection

Data were collected using taped, loosely-structured interviews scheduled at the convenience of the eight tutors. The general format of the interviews was the posing of the research questions and the probing of the answers. Following the interviews, the tapes were transcribed. I then met with most of the tutors a second time and they were

given the opportunity to check the transcripts for accuracy and intent. (In one instance, the tutor and I were unable to meet personally and the follow-up interview was conducted by telephone.) Changes were made as requested by the tutors. Follow-up discussions were conducted as needed to clarify information or to gain additional information.

Throughout the process of writing the thesis, I maintained a personal journal in which I documented daily happenings related to the study. This journal proved to be valuable for two reasons: during the data collection phase, it made me more aware of events related to tutors and to the distance education setting that were occurring; during the writing phase, it helped me to recall events that occurred throughout the data collection and it helped me to recall tutors within a context.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted with two tutors to give practice into conducting an interview, and insight into the type of information that might be obtained. The interviews were transcribed and portions were analyzed in the manner required for the thesis.

As a result of this activity, I realized that I had to work at being an active listener in order to ask follow-up questions that would clarify unclear aspects of the tutors' comments. I recognized the value of preparing for the interviews by writing only key words and/or phrases (not sentences) on the first page of my notepad. I also learned to jot down key words that would remind me of topics to be explored later in the interview while, at the same time, maintaining an awareness of what was currently being said.

Data Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of the study was enhanced by reference to credibility safeguards as referred to by Guba and Lincoln (1982). Peer debriefing and member checks were used to provide credibility of the research.

I engaged in a form of peer debriefing (Guba and Lincoln, 1982, p. 247) in my research course which was occurring at the same time as the interviews. I was able to discuss with my classmates the ongoing research and to verbalize my anxieties.

Triangulation (Guba and Lincoln, 1982, p. 247) was used to support data. Research material in journals and discussions with ex-tutors (for the same

institution) provided support for the analysis derived from the interview data. As well, using the same key words and phrases as a basis for each interview resulted in an overlap of information which supported individual tutors' comments.

In order to test further for credibility, member checks were used. I would rephrase information which the respondent had provided for me and ascertain that my interpretation of the material was correct. As well, transcriptions of the interviews were returned to the respondents with questionnable areas highlighted for follow-up discussion.

Data Analysis

Using content analysis, transcripts were examined for answers to the research questions and for other themes that emerged from the data. The transcripts were segmented according to content, and the numerous paper segments were placed in groups according to similarity of content. Topics were then identified and assigned to the groupings of the data.

Summary

The methodology of the study was the focus of chapter three. Within the study design, the research framework, the selection and contact of respondents, and the data collection were outlined. Then the pilot

study, data trustworthiness, and data analysis were described. The following chapter addresses the findings of the study.

Chapter Four

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

In this chapter, the results of the analysis of the data are discussed according to categories which arose from the data and written up under the major research questions. The categories which are discussed evolved from the tutors' discussions about various aspects of the role they filled, the learners they worked with, and the institution which employed them. Underlying their responses were a number of themes which will be disclosed in the final section. Interviews were conducted with eight distance education telephone tutors to discover what it meant to them to be a tutor in a distance education setting. All interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participants. Of the eight tutors, only one was not working in a second capacity elsewhere. Four were employed on a fulltime basis -- two by postsecondary institutions and two by government agencies. Another three were enrolled in doctoral programs at the University of Alberta with their coursework complete and the dissertations being written.

Overall, the tutors' academic qualifications were impressive. Two had doctorates; four others had completed the doctoral courses and had only to finish

their dissertations; each of the others possessed three degrees, including a masters.

Two of the respondents were men and six were women. This ratio did not correspond with the overall number of men and women tutoring in the selected department; the ratio there, according to the institution's calendar, was approximately two males for every female. In total, 202 tutors were listed in the calendar, 112 males and 90 females. The number of male and female tutors was equally balanced in all departments except the one involved in this study. The respondents in this study were selected because of their proximity to Edmonton and their availability at the time of the data gathering.

The Respondents

Each of the respondents has been described below in a very brief manner. Their names have been changed. Enough information has been provided to put each into a context for the reader while being cognizant of the promise of anonymity.

Don's interview was scheduled in a small graduate student office at the University of Alberta. The meeting had been set a week in advance. Based on the entries in his date book, Don seemed to be a very busy person although he never gave any indication that the

interview was an imposition. Don was a person who spoke slowly, thinking as he spoke. He seemed to consider the value and the meaning of words used, both by himself and by the investigator. Often, he would question the meaning of a word that, to the investigator, had only one obvious meaning.

Don began tutoring in 1984, the same year he entered the doctoral program at the local university. He was currently serving as a tutor for 2 1/2 blocks of home study (approximately 90 students), one teleconference course and one seminar course. As he said,

> I am called a tutor and it doesn't matter what hat I wear to [the institution], I'm still a tutor so that whether tutoring means a seminar leadership or teleconference leadership or telephone tutoring....

During the interview, Don received a telephone call from one of his students; he responded to the inquiry at that time, and the call lasted about five minutes. Don is married and has a family.

Barb met the interviewer in the same small graduate office as Don did. Her interview was scheduled for noon, and she arrived a bit late. However, she was not flustered by either her lateness or the forthcoming interview, and the interview proceeded smoothly. Barb had begun tutoring quite recently, and she readily admitted that her outlook

might change with the passage of time, and with experience. She was tutoring one block of students, but planned to take on more. Her awareness of the institution and of distance education had developed because of a number of friends and acquaintances who were involved in tutoring. Beth was single.

Lori was willing to be interviewed in her home. Time was limited because she had to be at the local office of the distance education institution in an hour to drop off some assignments and to pick up some more. Lori was experiencing a busy period, and this interview had been postponed for a number of weeks until an extremely heavy load of marking had been completed. The interview was being sandwiched in before she began another load. After years of experience as a tutor, Lori had recognized that the tutor role had never become what she had anticipated it would when she started. A feeling of frustration was evident. Lori was married and had a family.

Anne was interviewed in her office at a community college where she was employed on a fulltime basis. She taught four courses at the college in the same discipline that she tutored; all classes involved a heavy marking component. Anne was extremely friendly and an enthusiastic participant; she was quite positive

about the institution, and her personal experiences with it.

The office was very small and not well lit. It was filled with books and papers. Anne apologized for the mess of paper, but personal circumstances had led to an absence from work for a number of days and her marking had piled up. A consequence of this was that she was behind in her tutoring work, for it fell second to the fulltime job. Anne said that she would like to become a fulltime tutor if it were ever possible. Anne was single.

Moira met with the investigator in her office at a postsecondary institution where she was employed on a fulltime basis. She had a light, airy office which contained all the necessary support technology for her position. We were interrupted three times by telephone calls, but none related to tutoring.

Moira had been tutoring for many years so that she tended to perform administrative tasks, not in the required manner, but in her own way; to date, she had had no negative feedback on this so she planned to continue. She said that this personal freedom contributed to her enjoyment of the tutoring role. Moira was married and had a family.

Bob and the investigator met in his office in a government facility where he maintained a senior

administrative position which was quite demanding. The interview was a bit shorter than the others because of his limited tutorial experience. At one point, his secretary told him that he had received a telephone call from one of his students; he asked her to take a name and number, so that he could return the call later in the day.

Bob had many observations on the tutorial function (or lack thereof) in other distance education institutions because a large number of his employees were required to obtain certification in this way. He thus had a number of definite ideas based on feedback from others. Bob had prepared for the interview because he had one point that he wanted to communicate in a strong way; it related to his personal experiences as a beginning tutor. Bob was single.

Lee met the investigator in her home after dinner. She was a busy person but communicated only a feeling of calm and serenity. She was soft spoken but not hesitant to speak out. She had been a counsellor, a school teacher and a university lecturer. She had not liked the discipline aspect of the classroom setting, and so enjoyed the absence of this factor in tutoring.

Lee maintained two other jobs as well as tutoring; she had a fulltime position and was also self-employed in the mental health field. She was very knowledgeable

in her field and spoke about a broad range of topics. Lee did not speak at length about any aspect of the tutoring role but was willing to expand on her answers when requested. Lee was a single mother.

Bev was interviewed in her backyard. She was a very confident person who spoke freely of her tutoring experience. She was hoping to complete her dissertation soon in order to obtain fulltime employment. She did not plan to tutor in combination with a fulltime job.

Bev identified a number of ambiguities in tutoring that were bothersome to her. Both as a graduate student and as a tutor, she was in no position of importance in the hierarchies associated with the roles; however, the former held promise of some rewards for success -- a successful dissertation, a title and future employment. The latter held no such rewards, as is clear by the following comment.

> It's a nice way to earn a bit of money and do a bit of teaching, have some student contact and still be at home with your family. Whether I tutor beyond this year depends on what I end up doing. I have no ambition to make tutoring my career.

Bev was single.

Data Findings

In this section, the results of the analysis of the data will be discussed according to categories

which arose from the data. These will be written up under the major research questions.

1. How and Why Did the Respondents Become Tutors?

The hiring process. For the respondents involved in this study, the manner in which they were hired was fairly consistent. All had been hired at different periods during the last twelve years. Yet, from those hired twelve years ago to those hired in 1988, none had applied for the tutor's position as a result of an advertisment in the newspaper; instead, they all knew someone who was able to help them obtain the position.

> About a year ago, one of the senior administrators at [the institution] whom I had been working with suggested that if I were interested in doing some tutoring, there may be some opportunities for me.... Over a period of several months, a position became available and I was able to get it. (Bob)

> I went through an official selection process but I would have to admit that I would not have thought to apply if it hadn't been for [a coordinator] taking the initiative and asking me to apply. (Barb)

Interestingly, two of the respondents had applied for tutorial positions earlier in their careers as a result of newspaper advertisements and had been rejected. Later, after establishing relationships with individuals employed by the institution, both were urged to apply for available positions and were accepted.

> Lo and behold, four years later in the fall of 1985, I was at a conference and my present coordinator was there and he asked me if I was still interested in tutoring and I said "Yes." So there was finally an opening in [the subject] and I started as a course tutor. (Anne)

Don referred to subsequently meeting one of the individuals who had interviewed him when he was an unsuccessful candidate:

> Whether she recognized me or not, I don't know, but I recognized her and we developed a friendship and thus, when a position became available, I was able to again apply for it and was interviewed and hired. (Don)

One of the respondents, a long-term tutor, had the impression that the hiring of tutors had changed considerably over a ten-year period:

> At that time, tutoring was not understood. Frequently, the way they got tutors was by word of mouth. It was very informal to start with. You could call a friend with appropriate credentials and tell them to get their resume over to [the institution] if they wanted to be a tutor.... Now, the selection process is much more difficult and the qualifications are higher. They look for people with more teaching experience and more academic background than they did in those days. (Moira)

It did make sense, however, that even if the selection process had become more formal and the qualifications sought had become higher, that those who tutored associated with others who were similar to them in education and training; thus, the word-of-mouth

process continued to impact on the hiring of staff at the distance education institution.

> I was interviewed but it was a foregone conclusion that I would be hired because the coordinator wanted me to be the tutor. I don't think that anyone looked at whether I was good on the telephone or knew how to handle people. (Anne)

Some of the tutors were interested in tutoring because it represented something new and different for them to try.

> I had quite a bit of knowledge (about distance education). I've asked a lot of questions and I've been interested in the process for a number of years. (Lee)

> I've long been interested in [the institution], the whole program and also the politics of the place. I have some background and connection with it in that way. (Barb)

The respondents' interviews varied. One said that tutors had to be interviewed for each new course that they applied to take on so that some had experienced more than one interview. Only some of the tutors participated in telephone interviews.

> The first interview was in person with the coordinator and another person. The second was a teleconference, which I have never done before. It was interesting. There were three people in different places -- one in Calgary and two in [the site of the institution]. (Lee)

However, the most recently hired tutor did not have a telephone interview; his was conducted in a traditional face-to-face setting.

> I went through a personal interview with tutorial services and some personnel representatives from [the institution]. It was a fairly good interview. I was impressed with the quality of it. (Bob)

Only one of the respondents ascribed a reason to the type of interview she had. Barb felt that her conference-call interview was an introduction to the technology that she would have to deal with (which she decided was relatively foreign to her).

> I think the very idea that they had a telephone interview rather than a personal one is designed to find out how you handle yourself on the phone. (Barb)

For the duration of the interview, all she was dealing with was voices to which she could never put faces. She later stated that the experience has helped her greatly in her role as a tutor. It made sense that all tutors hired by a distance education institution be exposed to some form of non-contiguous interaction, however brief, just to have the experience that their students would have on an ongoing basis.

The orientation process. The respondents prepared for the tutor role in a variety of ways. Lee was fortunate to receive a personal orientation.

> I spent a lot of time with someone who was tutoring the same course and someone who has tutored the course for some time. They went through the procedures, my fee, a lot of the paperwork procedures as to who to send the marks for the assignment to, etc. Any questions I had were dealt with. (Lee)

Anne related what she received from her employer.

> Well, I was handed the 'Tutor Role' which is their booklet about what a tutor is supposed to do and how we're supposed to act on the telephone and the kinds of things that we're supposed to facilitate for students and the knowledge that we're supposed to have. We're to commit it all to memory before our first telephone session.

Others received no preparation, and perceived this to be a serious lack.

> One thing that is lacking is a proper orientation of the tutors. That is something that would have helped me a great deal at the beginning but because I already had a teaching background and because I had already been involved in the college and university system, I was able to compensate. I thought to myself, "God, if I hadn't had that, I would have been a cork floating on the ocean for a good long time." ... I received virtually no orientation. I got the package of materials and that was all. Oh yes, and there was a meeting with the tutorial services personnel. (Bob)

> ...but there is just absolutely nothing specially for the tutor that says, now be sure that people are aware of this or that, you know, or cautions you about certain kinds of things. I found that about adminstrative stuff too. I was advised to be aware of regulations about extensions and applying for exams, and so on, and so I informed myself by reading the calendar but again, it's rather an ambiguous situation to be in. (Barb)

Based on their experiences, the tutors felt that there was a need for a comprehensive introduction to the multi-faceted process.

> What should have happened would have been a formal orientation program for tutors of at least one day duration. I don't think the subject area is at all relevant. You can

> have tutors from a broad range of subjects all get an orientation to the university at the same time. For someone new to [the institution], it would be nice to know what the university is all about, what it looks like. Host it in the town where the university is located. (Bob)

All indicated that more information and guidance would have been useful prior to the commencement of their work as a tutor.

> It might be good to have a buddy system in place for tutors, you know. I had a colleague across the hall who answered an awful lot of questions for me during the first month. What if I hadn't had him? There are certain things that I wouldn't ask freely of a coordinator because the coordinator is still your boss. So I was lucky but all tutors are not. (Barb)

Without a doubt, all tutors would have liked their employer to provide more comprehensive information about the institution and the educational opportunities available. They would have liked the opportunity to visit the town where the institution was located because few had been there. Too, many would have liked more course-specific information -- tutoring notes and marking guides would have been helpful in standardizing tutor performance and student evaluation.

2. <u>What Do Tutors Do?</u>

Those individuals who tutor do so in a variety of ways. Overall, they perform a large number of tasks in their own way. Some of the responses relating to this

topic are described in the following pages. As well, some of the associated frustrations and stresses are outlined.

Performing the activities. Looking at her performance as a tutor, one of more experienced tutors related the following:

> The tutor function is more formalized now as the university has grown. When I started, there were twenty students and twenty tutors. Now there are more than two hundred tutors. There was a time a few years ago when 90% of the work I did was information dissemination, which is what I mean answering administrative-type questions like "Where do I write my exam?" Now, my role is more 50/50 -- information dissemination and learning facilitation. (Moira)

Most of the respondents tended to include two terms amongst all that they listed to describe the major work that they performed as tutors. 'Motivating' was the most often-used term; all but one of the respondents referred to their motivational role. However, different types of motivation were alluded to; some felt that motivation occurred as a result of frequent telephone contact and others felt that motivation involved diffusing some of those discouraging elements that students encountered. Lori motivated her students by helping them set a schedule or a pace that should be helpful. This pervasive tone of motivation was also reflected in the support that

some tutors offered to their students outside the prescribed three-hour periods each week.

> I don't want my students to lose steam so I tell them that if they have a problem and I'm not available, give me a call and I'll get back to you. So here's a student that has called me right in the middle of the day when I would normally be doing something else. (Don)

The respondents used various terms to refer to what they saw as the other primary component of their tutoring role -- teaching, instructing, assisting, coaching, discussing, facilitating, serving as academic expert or instructional support. The emphasis on each varied from one tutor to the next and, depending on their personal emphasis, tutors used different techniques to help their students achieve success.

Each individual performed a number of activities when acting in the tutor capacity. These activities could, and did, vary from tutor to tutor; they seemed to reflect the tutors personal approach to education and learning.

Don focussed primarily on assisting his students to prepare for exams; for him, the important aspect was that his students would know the correct answers and pass the course.

> My time is certainly filled with those people that call me in terms of questions about the course -- problems they might have. But more significantly, I think in preparation for exams.... Now, I think that they find that

> this assistance for exams is the most valuable assistance that I provide them with. (Don)

Bob, as tutor of a course that required extensive practical application in the field, emphasized the importance of facilitating the mastery of the program content so that it could be successfully applied by the student at the end of the course.

> Primarily, most of the tutor tasks are description and clarification of the program content and concepts, and application of these particular concepts. (Bob)

Moira appeared to stress learning for its own value. As opposed to Don, she would not tell a student what an answer was.

> It is very easy for some tutors to teach. If a student has a problem, let me tell him the solution. But I have now decided to be less directive, with the idea that the student has to learn the course, not me. (Moira)

Some respondents felt that they served as a learning facilitator (or an organizer), providing guidance in a variety of areas.

> I do a fair bit of guidance, too -- just how to deal with this course. I want them to approach the course with the right process. I make sure they're using the objectives the way they're supposed to be used. (Moira)

Another activity which seemed to be integral to the tutor function was that of providing a contact -- someone to talk to, someone who could relate to the student's thinking and activities.

> When they really want to discuss ideas and look into things and understand if they're on the right track about something, then the tutor is the only contact they have to turn to. (Anne)

Bob described his native Canadian students as requiring a tremendous amount of support and encouragement. He attempted to provide it for them through regular contact.

> I try to ensure that I contact them at least once a week to see how they're doing without appearing to coerce them into the learning process. (Bob)

Don saw the initial contact as his first step in helping the student to pass the course; he explained aspects of the course which might be confusing.

> I try to make a contact early to introduce myself and to indicate when I'm available and also some of the idiosyncracies of the course that they're involved in. (Don)

He then went on to say that, if they didn't follow through in the course, he might try three or four times to contact them in the six-month contract if he could find the time.

> ....But my time is certainly filled with those people that call me in terms of questions about the course. Problems they might have.

Some of the respondents mentioned evaluation, both formal and informal, as one of the key functions they performed.

> I do a lot of telephone testing and I provide human contact for the students. I am someone to bounce ideas off. (Lee)
>
> I can have them read back what they've written and give them immediate feedback over the phone. (Barb)

Frustrations and Stresses. Throughout the interviews, certain types of frustrations and stressful situations were consistently identified. Some of these were related to the institution; others were related to the tutor role itself.

Most of the tutors disliked the inconsistency that existed from tutor to tutor as they performed their role. (The source of information about other tutors was feedback from students.) The tutors expressed a desire to be provided with specific tutorial notes for the course to be taught, and marking guidelines for the required assignments. One tutor took the initiative in developing evaluation criteria and then shared them with Bev.

> My colleague had started to develop a grading criteria sheet, not because he was particularly enthusiastic about any kind of category evaluation system but he felt it would allow him to give students a lot of feedback rather quickly ..... and our coordinator is taking them and plans on using them. They give the students as clear an idea as possible of what they should be doing, what they should emphasize, etc.... My marking was pretty haphazard at the beginning, believe me. (Bev)

As well as assisting the tutor, this type of standardized approach to evalution should benefit the students -- a fact that Bev referred to in the following quote:

> It's upsetting, you know. A basic premise of education is that students are presented with evaluation criteria and encouraged to meet them. Yet, we had to do this for ourselves because it doesn't exist.(Bev)

Another frustration was the lack of a clear definition of roles. Although she had tutored for years, Moira was still unclear about the definition of her role as a tutor.

> The accountability factor still doesn't exist. Our contracts are still not that clear about what we're supposed to do. (Moira)

Barb had doubts about how well she was performing. It's hard to assess one's performance when one does not know the extent of the role. Should she have felt badly about the student referred to in the folllowing quote who did not know about extensions and thus failed to request one? What responsibility did the adult student herself have for learning about the rules and how they applied to her?

> I feel that I failed her in some way and yet I don't think that I actually have the responsibility. It's not clear to me exactly how much responsibility I actually have -- the parameters of my duties. (Barb)

> I don't know (if assignments must be typewritten). It really is interestingly

> ambiguous. Nowhere in the study guide does it say that they must be typed and yet one fellow had a tutor who would not accept anything that was not typed, so he has to ask every tutor what they want. Apparently a tutor can set goals and limitations. I wouldn't dream of it! (Barb)

Tutors were treated in different ways with respect to examination procedures; some tutors were supposed to be notified when their students wished to take a final exam; others were not. In some courses, the student had the freedom to take an exam without consulting the tutor. What importance could be attributed to a tutor when this happened?

> The other thing, I am not told when my students have registered to take the exam. A student can request the exam as he or she chooses during the course. Now this is a final exam and it seems wrong to me that students can request the final exam when they haven't yet submitted to me two or three of the assignments....I do think minimally that the university and the student should be informing the tutor when the student has scheduled the exam. (Anne)

The frustrating lack of professional recognition which some of the respondents felt was inherent in the above-noted situation extended to other areas as well.

> I think there has to be some sort of accountability but I don't know that there has to be accountability on a case-by-case basis. I think that once you have proven yourself, for example, to a certain degree you should be left alone and regarded as a professional. In the teaching of adults, we're not dealing with elementary students that cannot or will not speak out against what is happening in the classroom. (Don)

A stressful feeling of insecurity co-existed with the lack of professional recognition. A number of respondents felt that their position was not extremely secure because of the lack of long-term commitment on the part of their employer.

> I would strongly suspect that they could find a basis for getting rid of any tutor they wanted to because I don't think that any tutor is capable of living up to their expectations within the time that they give you.... What you're really relying on is your good relationship with the coordinator. (Don)

Contracts issued on a yearly basis did not provide the job security that people required. As stated previously, tutors usually had other jobs at the same time as they were tutoring. The other job might well have been their major work focus, thus creating a situation which could affect the tutors' sense of commitment to the institution.

> It's been a bit too much for me lately. When I have to prioritize, my face-to-face students have to be acknowledged first. Thus, [the institution] becomes second. That bothers me because I like that job but the students have been put on hold. That has really bothered me. (Anne)

> I've just done my income tax and I am now into a higher bracket. The work I am doing for [the institution] isn't worth the little bit I'll take home from it. (Lee)

Stress existed for tutors for a variety of additional reasons. Along with the above-mentioned

stress related to the insecurity of tutoring, there was time-related stress.

> I think there is a certain amount of stress in that you are unable to do the job in the time that they have allotted and you are always spending your time to do their work. Yes, that kind of stress. You have this pile of assignments that has to be graded and you haven't got to them yet and you want to get them back to the student as quickly as you can. There are those kinds of stress. (Lori)

> I think where it gets hard is when someone has such a heavy student load that they can't do the supportive things that they would like to do. If you had to go quickly through a quiz and then say goodbye in order to take another call, then there's pressure. (Lee)

Then, of course, there was the stress related to the isolation of the tutorial role.

> I feel that I'm sort of out there in a void. It's so much easier now that I have found a fellow tutor to call. Even for filling out the forms, you know, it's not that you can't call and get some help on these things but you get tremendous packages of forms and calendars and everything else. It's really overwhelming! (Barb)

> There is really nowhere else to turn except to another phone call and that is isolating. (Bev)

For each tutor, it seemed that there had been some situations where a colleague would have been welcomed -- someone who understood the role and its limitations.

> I must say that the whole thing would be different if I didn't have a colleague like ---. Not only the sharing kinds of things in the beginning and now, the collegiality (which I know he enjoys too) of being able to talk things over. He set up marking criteria and has done other things that I benefit

> from.... It works both ways and it helps us both an awful lot. (Barb)

Most of the respondents indicated that it was impossible to perform all tutorial functions in the time allotted by their employer. Don remarked that most people preferred to tutor more than one block in order to have more time to fulfill all paper-based requirements; apparently, two blocks did not equate to twice as much paperwork.

> If they expected what they asked for, then their [the institution's] turnover would be so great that they couldn't handle it.... The amount of work that they do for one tutor block takes them much beyond the time that is allotted for one block so they take on more.

Barb explained how the job consistently permeated other aspects of her life.

> Between the fact that the bureaucracy is not available to me at night when I might have the time, you know at 9:00 at night it's quiet and if I could phone and do whatever needs doing then, it would be fine but by the time I spread that over the next day or two, leaving messages here and there, and deal with whatever requests there are and paper work -- beyond that, I find that a month slips by and I do not get to all my students. (Barb)

The tutors' responses regarding the frustrations of tutoring overlapped extensively -- lack of understanding about their function, lack of course support and evaluation guidelines, inconsistencies related to exams, lack of professional recognition, insecurities

and isolation were all mentioned by a number of respondents.

3. What Skills and Knowledge Are Required for Tutoring?

In describing the skills and knowledge areas that they thought were basic to the tutor function, the tutors themselves did not deviate very much from a common theme -- the need to possess content knowledge and interpersonal skills. Some gave them equal emphasis.

> There are two broad categories; one is course specific and related to your course expertise. That's the basis on which most of the tutors are hired -- their academic qualifications in the area. However, there is a whole other area that hasn't been stressed and that is your interpersonal skills. (Lori)

> I'd have to look at background knowledge as one of the basic requisites and then look at the way the person could relate to people -- their sensitivity to the students. I could determine this through talking to them and digging out some of their values and principles of just how they would deal with situations. (Lee)

Others emphasized one more than the other.

> I think the communication skills -- the personal skills -- are probably even more important than knowledge of core content in the end, unless I start encountering people who ask me much more heavy-duty questions than they have done in the past. (Barb)

One aspect which permeated a number of interviews was the tutors' perception that the institution was forced

to accentuate the content knowledge of its tutors in order to maintain the credibility of the institution.

> I think that they're caught in this bind of wanting to present themselves as being credible a la traditional universities. This concern, at the same time, can seriously undercut doing the job that they are mandated to do. (Barb)

Anne's thoughts on this matter pointed out one problem of stressing content knowledge over personal skills.

> Theoretically, anyone can tutor given the knowledge to do it. I think that it's like teaching. Anyone can teach but that doesn't mean that you can establish a rapport with students. You have to have qualities of interest in those people, qualities of warmth, and you don't get that from everybody.... When you are the only contact that the student has, you have to do something more with them than just say "Hello. Yes? Problem with [subject area]? Here's the answer. Goodbye." You have to be a human being and you have to come across that way. (Anne)

Barb concurred.

> An interesting thing about tutoring and about distance education is that it's important not to get too credentialed in your attitude.... I'm sure that there are tutors with just a bachelor's degree who, if they have some content knowledge, make as good or better tutors than others because of an ability to be clear and warm over the phone. (Barb)

One of the respondents went quite a bit further in describing necessary skills for tutors. He introduced telephone skills and understanding of the medium.

> First, they should have some skills over the telephone, some experience with the telephone. Too, a broad content background on that particular subject area. They should

> have been involved in designing similar courses and they should be skilled teaching helpers and interested in the welfare of the students. Those in combination -- content and process and facilitative skills -- along with the telephone aspect. (Bob)

Lee spoke about the limitations of communicating only by telephone and wondered how many people recognize those limitations.

> Tutors should understand the limitations of the telephone; it's one-to-one communication but you can't do anything with body language. Research done a few years ago on different ways of communicating found that people exercise less sensitivity if they don't have feedback so telephone behavior has to be modified to a point. (Lee)

Along with telephone skills, there were others that could be learned which would, according to the respondents, facilitate the job of tutoring. One of them was the ability to follow through.

> One quality is follow through. Experience has shown me that if I don't follow through, my students are not successful. (Don)

Another was the need to be organized.

> One more thing would be an individual who is fairly well organized and who has the capacity or resources to organize files well. Files develop quickly. I keep a running record -- all conversations with all students, the nature of them, etc. I think it's very important to keep that in place. (Bob)

A third was recognizing how to eliminate actions which could be interpreted as overpowering or authoritarian.

> I am working very hard on not being overpowering or authoritarian. If a student

has a problem, it is easiest for me to tell him the solution. However, I am now tending to be less directive, with the idea that the student has to figure this new course out, not me. Often, if they don't understand something, they have some error in their knowledge. So I start with their understanding by saying "Tell me what you think." Then I go from there. I am trying for a balance, instead of taking the easy way out and telling them everything. (Moira)

4. How is Tutoring Valued?

Values were ascribed to tutors and tutoring, both by tutors and by others. Personal experiences played a large part in determining these values. Respondents indicated a number of positive aspects to the job of tutoring. At the same time, however, Lori was the only one who viewed herself performing a professional role.

I see it as a profession. I see that it is different from classroom teaching, which I've done. I think that I've had to develop new skills and I still feel that I'm learning, which I find interesting and I'm surprised that I still enjoy the work and I think that it's because I am always dealing with different people on a one-to-one basis. It's always a new challenge and you take into account the individual a lot more than you do in the classroom and you try to adapt. (Lori)

Positive aspects of tutoring. One of these was the flexibility that existed, although this same flexibility could prove detrimental for the students.

In this job, I have a lot of flexibility. It's a good thing because I've fallen behind and no one has been bugging me. I told my coordinator and explained the reasons and he

is comfortable that I'll get caught up. (Anne)

Another was the enjoyable experiences that tutors had with their students.

> I find it enjoyable to hear someone comment in surprise that they have passed a test. It is nice to get that reaction from someone who hasn't written a test in a long time. (Lee)

> I've had the luxury of being able to chat and I find that kind of nice. (Lori).

Some simply enjoyed the feeling of teaching.

> I am glad to have the opportunity to teach. It seems to me that's where I do teaching, rather than when students call me as they're doing assignments or readings. No, it's after I've seen an assignment that I can say to them, "Here's what you missed. Here's an excellent idea." Thus, they're learning from my marking and my work means more than just a grade. (Barb)

A number mentioned that they appreciated the interaction with interesting people.

> I often say that I've had many jobs vicariously. You know, I've learned a lot about what it's like to work in a hospital, to be an RCMP officer, to work in a chicken factory (which I am very grateful that I've never had to do) and so forth, and I find that interesting. (Lori)

At a later point, Lori stressed that she was excited by the idea of distance education and all that could be accomplished.

Lee and Anne also enjoyed the one-to-one nature of tutoring. They related to their students and enjoyed assisting them as they worked through the course.

> Tutoring is something I can do and look forward to doing.... It's human interaction on the phone and I like it, with people that I never see. (Lee)

> I like it. I get a chance to be involved with people. I get to be friends with some of my students and I've met some of them. (Anne)

At the same time, the respondents differed in their value of the tutor to the students. Earlier, it was mentioned that some students performed very well on their own with little assistance from the tutor. For others, the situation was different.

> The way it [the institution] is set up, the tutor really is the link between the university and the student.... The only way they get feedback on what they're doing is through me. They never meet a professor. It is strange. Tutors are like an academic representative. (Barb)

Most interesting of all was the difference between the value ascribed to the tutor role by the tutors themselves, and the value ascribed to the tutor role by others, according to the tutors. The respondents all felt that tutors perform a unique and important role in the educational structure.

> Tutors are the backbone of the correspondence type of course. Everything hangs together on the tutors. I think that others feel the same -- that our role is important. (Lee)

> From a tutor point of view, I think that we're valuable. I think that this university is a special institution because of the tutors.... I think that we form a very unique component to have at [the institution]

> and they would be unwise to get rid of that. (Anne)

However, most felt that other university personnel had never considered tutors to be important or integral to the success of the institution.

> Well, our value hasn't changed. I think that we're really an appendage. We're not seen as a part of the institution. The administration has always been very forthcoming in terms of verbal praise at tutor conferences and occasions of that nature, but beyond that, I don't think that we're integrated at all. We're always been seen as an add-on. (Lori)

> We can't have much value if there are academics that think we could be eliminated. They're talking about generic tutors who would come on-line and be able to deal with a variety of courses. That is where we're thought of as only facilitators, not as people with academic expertise.... Perhaps we could all dress in yellow with black lettering. (Anne)

As well as reflecting upon their own performance as a tutor, the tutors also described their experiences with students and institutional representatives. These were the individuals who had a major impact on the tutor actions.

5. What Were the Tutor/Learner Relationships?

One of the components in the distance education spectrum which impinged most strongly on the tutor's role were the students themselves. As stated earlier, these learners played an integral role in the evolution of the tutor role and were, indeed, the key reason for

the tutor's existence. How did the respondents view this important person?

General Characteristics of Learners. A number of general characteristics were ascribed to the learners by several tutors. One of the most common was that they fail to fully understand the concept of distance education; this lack of understanding, in turn, led to an underestimation of the work involved.

> I think that many students underestimate the amount of work involved, too. When they get it and see those daunting packages and sort them out to see what they contain in order to get started, and they see how much reading is required for the first assignment (and this course has miles of reading compared to lots). I wonder where they get their idea of the scope of a course. (Barb)

Most tutors referred to students who were unrealistic about the amount of time and effort required to successfully complete a course via distance education.

> I think that a lot of them are unrealistic about the kind of work involved. And a number of my students are carrying more than one course and also working fulltime.... It requires an immense amount of organization and discipline to have nothing else go wrong in your life. (Lori)

Some students discovered more about their personal styles of learning. One of Barb's students found that her learning style was not suited to the correspondence format.

> I tried and tried, and finally got through to her. She told me that she had withdrawn from the course. She thought that she had to be

> in a classroom and that this type of learning was not working for her.... It is a matter of learning styles; some people cannot carve out the time and are not oriented to doing it by themselves. (Barbara)

In combination with the above-mentioned unknowing and/or unrealistic approach to the distance education course, the spectrum of learners was also described as having a wide range of abilities relating to language and study skills.

> I have a broad range. Some of them should take English as a second language first of all but are quite bright and have university degrees from other countries. Some are native Canadians and need a tremendous amount of support and encouragement. (Bob)

> If they have some prior university or high school experience, then they wouldn't have to do it (i.e., take an entry-level language and reading test) because it is presumed that they have the skills. If we find out that they are lacking, it is hard to know what to do. Those coming with only grade 6 or 9 are advised by Student Services to take this to see where they are at. (Anne)

Another characteristic of the learners was the need for flexibility in scheduling.

> They need the flexibility. You know, being able to give over one night a week -- the same night -- is not possible for people on shifts. RCMP and hospital workers, they can't guarantee that they can be there one night a week. They also need that extra time. (Lori)

> Those that I have difficulty reaching seem to have a variety of problems. The most difficult is a nurse who works evenings so she has trouble with my hours of 7 - 10 on Thursday evening. One person drives a

> snowplough and she is often called out to work in the evening. (Lee)

A new variable related to the amount of time that a student was able to put into the course(s).

> Something I've found in the last few years for the first time are fulltime students. Those are new. They are unemployed people who, for financial reasons, are taking a whole load of courses and have to finish them in about two months to maintain their financial eligibility for financial loan.... Those students can keep their tutors really busy. (Moira)

One characteristic of the learners as a whole was the diversity of personal motivation that existed.

> Some of the students give themselves a very stiff deadline. And others don't. (Lee)

> I think that they sign up and pay early as a way of pushing themselves to get finished. The bit of pressure helps them. (Anne)

Learner needs. This personal motivation could be tied in with the needs of the learner. Student needs tended to be as diverse as any other aspect of these individuals. They ranged from a need for course-related or administrative information to a need for social contact.

> I have many conversations with my students. Their needs vary. Some don't want to be contacted at all. Others want straightforward information.... Others really want to talk because that's the only person they have to talk to about this. (Anne)

One experienced tutor had personally categorized learners into three groups.

> Simplistically, I look at students in three ways -- those with high needs for affiliation with the tutor, those who only need a few problems solved.... Then, there are the ones who don't need me at all. They're the robust learners who do well by themselves. (Lori)

Student needs could also be related to their reasons for taking the course.

> A lot of the students are there for career benefits and advancement. These students are motivated but not as much as those looking for a certificate. (Moira)

Responding to the needs of the learner. How did tutors attempt to cope with such a diverse population? Given that a tutor block could contain 30 students, and that most respondents tutored one and one-half or two blocks, tutors had to deal with a large number of students, each of whom represented a unique combination of characteristics. As a result, tutors had to work with each student on an individual basis. A few responses helped to clarify this concept.

> I have mixed feelings. Certainly, for some students, the tutor is critical. The dependent students would not be involved at [the institution] nor would they succeed at [the institution] if they didn't have a tutor. They require a lot of help and support -- and that is what we tutors can do. We provide that social contact that has to do with their own perception of how they can learn, as well as providing real counselling and problem-solving. (Moira)

From her words above and below, Moira indicated that she had decided to respond to those students who contacted her for the required information or support.

> What I've taken to doing, after many years and experiences, is to leave the responsibility to the student. I tell them that I'd like to hear from them, and I no longer chase students. I have 75 students and that number will be increasing. (Moira)

Bob described how he responded to the range of learner needs.

> I try to start with the student's understanding and go from there. I am trying for a balance. However, a lot of students want only an answer when they phone you. They've tried for three days and it still doesn't make any sense. So they aren't calling to be prompted. They want the answer in order to keep going. Then there's the person who doesn't understand any of the stuff. So there is a balance of need that I have to respond to out there. (Bob)

Anne stressed the support role that was required by many of her students and her method of filling that role.

> Often, I have to recognize that it's kind of a social contact. I find that with women who live on farms, isolated in many ways and sometimes I think that because I am a woman as well as their tutor, they feel like a friend is out there to call up and talk. Like, it's gabbing time now. And I am interested because I really like them. I think that is a big step to putting people at ease -- you talk about other things, you don't get right in there with the old academic stuff. People feel intimidated by that. (Anne)

Finally, two respondents had opposing outlooks on how the students reacted to the tutor activity. One felt that students took what they got, both from the tutor and from the institution; the other felt that

dissatisfied students were vocal with their displeasure.

> I've had very little trouble with students. Most are very accepting; they don't rock boats. (Moira)
>
> We're teaching adults who are consumers and, if you're not performing well, they will speak up. Even if you are performing well and they're not satisfied, they'll speak up. (Don)

What existed, then, was a group of individual students with accompanying needs and pressures and a group of individual tutors who were each, in his and her own way, trying to respond to them. At the same time, the tutors had to report to, and maintain their credibility with their employer.

6. What Were the Tutor/Institution Relationships?

The role of the institution providing distance education courses is very different from that of a conventional teaching institution. In the latter, the instructor in the classroom provides the contact with the students and is the major factor in determining student success or failure. In the distance education situation, it could be said that it is the institution that teaches, as opposed to the individual teacher. According to Kaye (1988), the important point was that, underpinning the students' overall learning programme, and specific learning activities, there existed a

deliberately planned and structured design, delivery, and support system (p.47).

Comparing Distance and Conventional Educational Institutions. In spite of the difference between the two systems of education, respondents often tended to compare their experiences as tutors in the distance education system with their previous experiences in the conventional system to which they were accustomed.

> When I was teaching at the college level, there was so much more that I could do to get the student involved in the learning process; here, we really do operate at a great distance from the student. (Bob)

> You know, in the classroom, things come to us and one thing leads to another and students bring in other points of view. Clearly, this course is written from one point of view and students just tend to mouth the course material because if it's in print, then it must be true. (Lori)

They spoke about the experience, which is referred to in the previous quote, of mediating a course which wholly reflected the philosophy of the developer, but not necessarily that of the tutor.

> The courses are well-written, although there is an obvious bias related to the coordinator. I think that some students get put off by that. I've decided to stay out of it. He wrote the course and I'm not concerned about it because, for the most part, my own slant goes in his direction as well. (Anne)

Bob was more critical of the course he tutored. He was hoping, in the near future, to have some input into a restructuring of the course.

> I think that my course, if it were restructured and presented in a different way, would be more successful. The course has a fairly academic focus when it comes to the whole communications issue. It would be a lot easier if the tutor could use concrete examples to show how some of the concepts are applied and take it out of the academic realm. That would make it easier on the tutors and improve the course. (Bob)

All the tutors were extremely positive about the value of a distance education institution in the educational spectrum. They believed that there was a large segment of the population which was benefitting from the availability of this alternative approach. However, respondents spoke of a number of concerns which they had about their employer. These concerns could be correlated with the need for a greater bureaucratic focus in a distance education institution.

Some Concerns about the Local Institution. Those concerns that were fairly common to the respondents are identified and described below. The first concern related to the primary focus of the institution: was it the student or not?

> It's a matter of who the university is there for, the administration or the students. To open up a post-secondary institution for people who don't have access to any other option -- that was the government's purpose.

> The administrators already have their education. (Anne)

The second concern related to the flexibility necessary for the students.

> I think even at [the institution] itself that some people are concerned that we give more time to complete a course and I really feel strongly that it's a misplaced concern. Most of the students have so many other things and yet they have some interest and they do want to do it; they just need extra time. So let's give it to them. (Lori)

This concern was correlated with various attempts to make the institutional operate in a more conventional manner (i.e., similar to traditional postsecondary institutions).

> I hope that [the institution] never gets into semesters because that would impose restrictions that are too great. This was not supposed to be a traditional university; it was to be a flexible institution that allowed students to fit their learning in with the rest of their life. I am totally opposed to the semester idea. It is an administrative idea because it makes things nice and neat.(Anne)

Too, Lori felt that the initial innovative spirit which fostered the development of the institution ten years ago was no longer present.

> In ten years, I haven't seen any innovative changes, only regressive ones. For example, taking away flexibility rather than increasing it or doing things in different ways. Our courses are still designed primarily in the same way; there are not options on how they are designed. We haven't expanded reading courses, and on teleconference we are still using the same format, and the equipment has not been

> improved. Now we're going a little more into seminars but that, again, is much more traditional. We are still doing thirteen weeks fitting the mold that is established by the traditional universities, and so I wish we were more innovative.

The movement towards the seminars was not being viewed with enthusiasm by a number of tutors. It was felt that the problems inherent in telephone tutoring a course which was designed and would be evaluated (in most cases) by someone else would only be more onerous for the tutor.

> Seminars are being used in my courses a bit, but not by me. The tutors are placed in a difficult position. The tutor/instructor will deliver the course materials and it's difficult because the tutors will end up instructing in order to explain facts and assignments, and help them work through the workbooks. The tutor is in a quasi-position of being sort of a tutor dealing with a set package of materials that he has to accept even though he didn't have anything to do with it. It's not like giving your own lectures but you also have to instruct.(Anne)

There did not seem to be much correlation between the duration of their employment with their current employer and the critical component of the respondents' comments. Both newer and older tutors identified very strongly with the learners; they were tutors for the benefit of the students. Thus, any indication of a change that would not benefit the student (according to the tutor's interpretation of that change) would not

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The Tutor/Institution Relationship. A number of respondents tended to use the term "they" to refer to representatives of the distance education institution. This was one of the strongest indications that tutors did not feel as if they were an integral part of the university itself. Certain activities occurred which perpetuated this feeling of separation. There was the perception that the institution did much to foster the tutors' feeling of isolation, both from the institution and from each other.

> It's not fair but it's been a strategy that the university has at its fingertips to control us. We're all separated. We're isolated from one another. We work as individuals because we each have an individual contract. (Anne)

Tutors did not seem to like differential pay scales based on uncontrollable (for them) factors such as who the academic coordinator was and how that person felt about the tutor support.

> We get paid extra for the marking, and that's another problem in the university. There's no set policy across the board as to what we're paid; it's worked out differently for different areas. Also whether you get paid for remarking things. We're in the midst of a struggle on that one right now. Some people have worked out private little deals with their area to get paid more -- with the coordinator and the next rank up. (Barb)

Lori described how the tutor-institution relationship seems to have remained constant over the years.

> There have been ongoing problems with tutors since the beginning of time. They have changed all methods about how we're paid and the forms, etc. They've tried a million different things. (Lori)

Hiring tutors on a contractual basis, allowing the existence of a diffential pay scale for marking, denying some tutors access to final exams or to student files -- all these activities have contributed to tutors' feelings of isolation and lack of professional identity as a tutor.

The Link Between the Tutors and the Institution.

The academic coordinator served as the link between the institution and the tutors. The respondents' interaction with their coordinators varied from extensive to occasional.

> We happened to meet when I met with the previous tutor and I then spoke to her on the phone and she told me to give her a call sometime. It's six months later and I haven't done that yet. (Barb)

Lee was able to initiate contact with her coordinator if she felt a need to do so.

> I can talk to my coordinator about any concerns I have and he wants me to flag his attention to anything he should know. (Lee)

On the other hand, Don's understanding was that the coordinator would contact him if the need arose.

> You don't communicate with the coordinator unless the communication is coordinator-initiated. There's very little communication with the coordinator, as a result.(Don)

Moira spoke from experience.

> I've had three coordinators over the years. I don't have much contact with them; it's more of a paper kind of contact. I see them maybe once a year at the tutor conference and then it's more of a social gathering than anything else. (Moira)

Anne's description of her coordinator completed the illustration of the diversity that prevailed with the coordinator-tutor relationship.

> I am fortunate because my coordinator is committed to his tutors. He is supportive of us. We have a really good relationship and we are lucky to have him as a coordinator. He shows an interest in us and I think that he is a kind of rabble-rouser up there on our behalf. (Anne)

The Tutor Value to the Institution. Finally, the respondents' thoughts about their own value to the institution were analyzed. Difficulties would continue to arise, according to most, until there was a clear definition of the tutorial function, and the parameters were clarified for all.

> It goes back to the definition of what is a tutor and that's still not clarified at [the institution]. I mean, clearly the people are hired only on subject matter expertise and if their job is defined as being able to answer questions about the course, then anyone who has a background in that area and reads the course can do that.... In the original model, people had different views of what tutoring should be.... There's no consensus, not within the tutor body nor the university. I think that, based on the last tutor conference, the majority of the tutors saw that they had both an interpersonal/ human relations orientation and a core-specific course content orientation. The debate was,

how much and where the emphasis should be. (Lori)

Some tutors felt that they were being retained primarily for political reasons.

> The tutor is sold to the students as a part of the package. They can't take it away unless they can convince the students that they're not losing a service. It would take time. So I think that there are a lot of people at Athabasca University who say that there is no evidence that tutors do make a difference, but politically it's very difficult to remove them. (Moira)

One of the respondents mentioned this same doubt about the worth of tutors.

> Home study depends so much on the student for accomplishment.... Someone would have to show me a study that demonstrates that the tutor is a significant factor in encouraging the student to accomplish the course. (Don)

Generally, tutors thought that the cost of their services was what the administration disliked the most -- that there must be less expensive ways to forge the link between the institution and the student. But, as Anne said, "Personal warmth can never be replaced by CAI or teleconferencing." And it was in this personal warmth that the tutors maintained their value lay; they provided the interpersonal component -- the motivation, the contact, the counselling -- which was so necessary to the success of the most important element of all -- the students.

Summary

An analysis of the data from the transcripts was structured according to categories which arose from the data and then written up under the major research questions. These major questions addressed the following areas: how and why the respondents became tutors, what tutors do when they tutor, what skills and knowledge are required for tutoring, how tutoring is valued, what are the tutor/learner relationships, and what are the tutor/institution relationships. Inherent in the data were a number of themes which are described in the next section.

Underlying Themes

Themes that emerged from the transcripts and my daily journal data are presented in order to further the reader's understanding of what it means to be a a distance education tutor. The themes that emerged are these: tutors personally shaped their own role; tutors defined their own role with the learners; the tutor role was full of uncertainty; and, the tutor role involved marginal socialization.

Tutors Personally Shaped Their Own Roles

The tutors involved in the research each described their multi-faceted role in a unique way, but it was

evident that a generally-shared meaning of the role existed. It seemed that the tutors' role was personally shaped by a number of factors. The main factor, however, was the lack of clear role definition by the employer. What were the expectations of the tutors in the system? This lack of a clear definition forced each tutor to take covert control of the role, and the role evolved over a period of time.

All of the tutors had previous experience in the traditional classroom. Indeed, some of them were instructors and tutors concomitantly at the time of the study. It seemed only reasonable for them to assume that there was a distinct similarity between the role of the classroom instructor and the distance education tutor; quotes in chapter four support the fact that this assumption did take place. Again, the lack of a clear definition of the role by the employer allowed the tutors to foster this assumption, and to act accordingly.

The interviews reflected institution-related differences that existed between tutorial roles and so contributed to individual role definition. Some tutors had received comprehensive orientation to their duties; others had not. Some tutors received support and frequent communication from their academic coordinators; others did not. Some tutors saw exams

and had input to revisions; others did not. Some tutors were paid more for marking and remarking; others were paid less.

According to those who had tutored for a number of years, their own role had changed over time as they experimented with what was acceptable to the institution and what was needed by the students. Thus, some tutors offered their services outside the prescribed hours each week and some did not. Some of the tutors monitored the hours that they spent on tutor-related activities, and performed no more than the required number of hours whereas others worked towards task completion regardless of the time it took. A number of tutors discovered that completing only a portion of the institutional forms elicited no negative feedback, and so they reduced the amount of record-keeping and feedback. Two tutors created their own personal forms based on their microcomputer printouts, and discovered that these could be submitted.

The tutor motivation for tutoring was also a factor in defining the extent and the content of the role. Those tutors who tutored for financial gain took on large tutor loads; they carried out the requisite tasks, like making the initial contact and marking assignments; past that, they responded when needed. At

the other extreme, those who tutored as a profession attempted to create for themselves an important niche in the student's educational realm.

Thus, the tutors shaped their roles and defined, to a large extent, their own interaction with the institution and the students they served.

Tutors Defined Their Own Relationship With The Learners

Overall, the respondents in this study were committed to the concept of distance education because they felt that it filled a void for a large number of students who, for whatever reason, had been unable to obtain the higher education that they wanted and/or needed. The tutors' commitment was to the students. They performed the requisite tasks because they wished to see the students succeed. However, it appeared that the tutors determined how to foster success for the students on the basis of past personal experience, all of it in a traditional setting.

From the information, it was obvious that the respondents supported students in different ways, focussing to a large extent on what they themselves considered to be the most important aspect of the educational process. Thus, those tutors who felt that a knowledge of the content was most important for follow-up application attempted, over the telephone, to

teach and to ensure that concepts were understood; those who emphasized knowing the correct answers and doing well on exams attempted to explain answers and provide practice exams ahead of time; those who emphasized learning for its own sake acted as facilitators and coaches; and those who focussed on the students themselves primarily provided much counselling. None of the above were practiced to the exclusion of all others; however, it was obvious that each tutor performed the tutor role in the manner which came most naturally to him or her, and which reflected the personal background and values of that tutor. That same tutor role provided the basis for the description that was given in the interviews for this study.

The Tutor Role Was Full Of Uncertainty

Tutors communicated a sense of frustration about the lack of clarity that existed regarding their role. What did it mean to be a tutor? Tutors were usually referred to as one element of the student support services. In the calendar of a local distance education institution (Athabasca University Calendar, 1987-88, p. 61), the following description was given of the tutors' role:

> The tutor assists students with course content and some administrative matters (most administrative matters are handled by the Office of the Registrar) and adds

> individualized attention to printed materials. The tutor marks and makes comments on assignments, and discusses, by telephone or letter, exams, course content, and strategies for understanding the material. In some courses, the tutor organizes lab sessions, seminars or discussion and self-help groups.

This description, in itself, was unclear because it contained many vague terms -- 'some' administrative matters and 'individualized' attention to printed materials were two of them. Just as the tutors didn't have a clear definition of their role, the students were lacking one also. What was the extent of tutor responsibilities towards the students? What responsibilities did the students have themselves? The tutors could have used more information on the parameters of both roles when they were first hired. Over time, they learned to cope on an individual basis which helped to explain the lack of consistency that became evident when the respondents described their methods of carrying out various tasks.

Frustration was also voiced by tutors about the lack of feedback regarding their performance. How well were they meeting the needs of their students? What needs were (and were not) being met? How well were they meeting the requirements of the institution? Could they do better, and if so, how? Feedback on

performance was a necessary part of role evolution that was lacking for the tutors.

This lack of feedback combined with the consistent parttime contractual status of tutors contributed greatly to perpetuating the widespread feeling of uncertainty.

Tutors Experienced Marginal Socialization

It appeared, based on the respondents' descriptions, that tutors experienced marginal socialization in their role. This was mainly due to the peripheral position that they enjoyed in the organizational structure. They were employed by an institution about which they knew very little. They were hired and represented by a department with which they had very little contact. They were instructed, for the most part, to contact their academic coordinator -- their link with the institution -- only if there was a problem or a need for academic input. They worked from their homes during the evenings, when support services were not available to them. And, finally, they received little feedback on any aspect of their performance, either educational or administrative. At the same time, they had little occasion for meeting with other people who worked for the same organization -- other tutors, coordinators, other faculty, support

staff. Occasional inservice sessions or yearly conferences were provided, but these were inadequate for any in-depth communication.

In a brief period of time, tutors had to adapt to the limited context of the tutor role. The majority of them were either employed in another fulltime job or they were graduate students working on courses and research. Too, all tutors had other components in their lives, to varying extents -- family, community, social, leisure, or personal. Tutoring activities had to be incorporated into an already-existing lifestyle. This fact combined with the distancing tactics of the institution fostered the isolation of the role and the marginal socialization that it represented.

Summary

The themes that arose from the data were presented in this section. These themes provided the essence of what it meant to be a tutor: tutors personally shaped their own roles; tutors defined their own roles with the learners; the tutor role was full of uncertainty; tutors experienced marginal socialization. A summary of the study, findings, personal reflections, and implications of the study will be given in chapter five.

Chapter Five

SUMMARY, FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

This chapter contains a summary of the study followed by the findings of the study, personal reflections ,and implications of the study for research and practice.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to find out what it means to be a tutor in a distance education setting. The respondents in the study were asked to describe how and why they became tutors, what tutoring involved, what skills and knowledge were required for tutoring, how tutoring is valued, what their relationships were with the learners and with the employing institution.

Methodology of the Study

In order to gain an understanding of what tutors do, the interpretive paradigm was used as the framework for the research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight distance education tutors. The tapes were transcribed, the transcripts were returned to the tutors to check for meaning and intent, and then the data were analyzed for categories and themes. Triangulation was carried out with tutors who had not

participated in the research regarding the appropriateness of the topics derived from the data.

Findings of the Study

The findings of the study were reported in chapter four; following a discussion of the categories that emerged from the compilation of the data, the underlying themes that prevailed were reported. A summary of the findings for each of the major research questions which served as guides to the development of the study and to the analysis of the data follows.

1. How and why did the respondents become tutors?

The hiring process for the tutors was quite consistent; all had known an employee of the institution who facilitated them in obtaining the tutor position. Becoming oriented to the tutor role was a difficult process for most; few felt that they had received adequate preparation for the scope of the role.

2. What do tutors do?

Performing the tutor role involved a number of activities, and the extent to which each was carried out varied considerably from tutor to tutor. However, most respondents felt that the tutor role had two major components: the first component was consistently

identified as 'motivator'; the second component was given a number of names -- teacher, coach, facilitator, academic expert were a few of these. Tutors tended to use different techniques in dealing with their students; furthermore, the tutors supported their learners in ways which reflected their own personal emphasis in learning. As examples of this, one tutor who focussed primarily on helping students to pass exams would provide them with the correct answers for questions while another who stressed learning for its own value would not provide any answers; the students had to arrive at the answers independently.

Interwoven with the positive aspects of tutoring were a number of situations which were frustrating and stressful for the tutors. The amount of inconsistency that existed within each role and between the individual roles was described by all. The lack of a clear role definition was a major contributor to this lack of consistency; neither the tutors, the students nor the institutional representatives, it was felt, could clearly define the scope and the expectations of the role. A lack of feedback -- about students, about performance, about the institution -- was frequently referred to. Two final frustrations were the overall lack of professional recognition accorded to tutors and the prevalent feeling of insecurity that permeated the

position. Stress was correlated with the ongoing insecurity, the isolation of the tutor role, and the limited time allotted by the institution for accounting procedures.

3. What skills and knowledge are required for tutoring?

Describing the skills and knowledge that they thought were basic to the tutor role, the respondents expanded upon the need to possess the necessary content knowledge and interpersonal skills. However, the emphasis on each varied considerably among the tutors. Other desirable qualities mentioned were the abilities to be consistent, to be organized, and to know how to eliminate overpowering, authoritarian actions.

4. What do tutors value about tutoring?

Among the positive aspects of the tutor role, respondents identified flexibility. However, it was noted that this same flexibility could be a negative aspect for the students. Respondents also described enjoying the social contacts, the opportunity for one-to-one interaction, and the feeling of 'teaching'.

In spite of the numerous frustrations raised, the tutors voiced positive aspects about the value to themselves of being a tutor. One felt like a true professional in the tutor role; others saw value in supporting students through a worthwhile experience and

in being their 'human link' with the distant institution. Respondents differed in their views about the value of the tutor for the student. It was recognized that some students performed very well with no tutorial assistance whereas others required periodic assistance for a variety of reasons; however, in the distance education system, the tutors all felt that they were the academic representative for the students, and therefore a valuable component of the system. When describing the value ascribed to tutors by others in the system, most respondents thought that tutors were considered to be relatively unimportant, peripheral, and too expensive.

5. What are the tutor/learner relationships?

Other topics were identified which related to the learners. A number of characteristics of the student body were described; some of these resulted from a failure to fully comprehend the concept of distance education and the implications for the learner. A new type of learner, the fulltime unemployed learner, was depicted. As a result of the large and diverse population which they served, the tutors had to work with each learner on an individual basis; their methods of responding to student needs were explained.

6. What are the tutor/institution relationships?

Tutors' descriptions of the role of the institution in distance education were expanded. In spite of recognized differences between distance and conventional educational institutions, it seemed that faculty, tutors, staff, and students based their performance on past conventional experiences. All tutors were very positive about the value of the distance education institution in the educational spectrum, but they did voice specific concerns about the employer.

Following the discussion in Chapter Four of the topics that developed from the data, the underlying themes were identified and expanded in Chapter Five. These were: the tutors personally shaped their own roles, tutors defined their own relationship with the learner; the tutor role was full of uncertainty; and, tutors experienced marginal socialization.

Reflections of the Study

As I concluded the study, I reflected on those aspects of tutoring which had been identified and clarified in response to the research questions; too, I reflected on the tutor-provided information which supported thoughts and ideas about tutoring from the literature review; finally, I thought about those

various issues which were touched on by the tutors in their descriptions but were not identified or clarified in the thesis because they lay outside the focus of the research.

Reflections related to the research questions.

My strongest feeling was amazement at the similarities that existed among the tutors in response to some of the research questions and the differences that existed in reponse to others. It made sense that the tutors all had similar reasons for undertaking the tutoring tasks; they were educated people who, for the most part, were occupied fulltime in an educational milieu and they were acquainted with others who were involved in distance education. Their interest in something new and different which would provide additional income was understandable.

In a like manner, the tutors' descriptions of their relationships with the learners and with their employers were very similar. Many of the same qualities and concerns about each were voiced. There was an increasing sense of separation that the tutors felt from the institution. Those tutors who had felt the need for extensive support and guidance at the beginning of their tenure gradually were forced to became more and more self-sufficient. In fact, it was

interesting to note just how removed from the institution most of the older tutors felt. Although, at the beginning of their tutoring experience, they had felt a strong desire to "be a part of" the institutional setting, they later lost that desire. Where once they had wanted to attend inservice sessions and conferences in order to meet and talk with others, after a while most ignored any invitations to do these very same things. And so it seemed that the initial enthusiasm that accompanied the commencement of a new role for most individuals, and which existed for these tutors when they were hired by the institution, waned considerably.

In discussing what tutoring involves and what tutors do when they tutor, the greatest difference among the tutors became obvious. Most of the tutors had not clearly thought through all the implications of the differences between a classroom instructor and a telephone tutor. These terms implied a great difference in the relative importance of the tutor to the student. The tutor was only one of several mediating forces in the distance education spectrum whereas the teacher was the primary source of information and evaluation for the student. This was correlated with a difference in the scope of their obligation to the students, a factor that tutors seemed

to recognize only with experience. There also was the difference in the type and extent of interaction that tutors and teachers enjoy with the students. The eye contact and body language that occur in the face-to-face setting are powerful means of communication that are lacking in the distance setting. What means existed to compensate for this lack?

Reflections related to the review of literature.

All the tutors felt that they did indeed provide much of the support which is, according to the reviewed literature (Sewart, 1982; Holmberg, 1974), a very necessary requirement for success for the majority of students. Communicating with students was intended to support their motivation and interest, to support and facilitate content and learning, and to assess their progress.

The respondents also confirmed that they filled a variety of roles, many of them requiring different skills. The "multiple function" described by Coldeway (1982), the possession of "an array of key competencies" (Clarke et al., 1986) -- both terms can be applied to the respondents' descriptions of their tutor roles.

At the same time that the respondents described the various activities comprising their tutor function,

they were unable to clarify the nature of the tutor's role within the institution. Each could relate to his or her own performance but none could be specific about the expectations of the tutor role held by others.

A number of respondents indicated through their comments that they considered tutoring to be teaching; at the same time, they did not seem to feel that their prior experience in the classroom was beneficial for them as tutors. The differences between the role of the classroom teacher and the distance education tutor that were identified by Clarke et al. (1986) were alluded to by many of the respondents indirectly. It would probably be helpful for future tutors to be made aware of the distinct differences between the contiguous and the non-contiguous instructional role.

Few of the tutors interviewed had received any type of comprehensive or specific training. Rather, they solicited assistance from tutors known to them or attempted to learn from experience. While this type of experiential learning can prove valuable, it does not constitute adequate training for tutors with multiple roles and few opportunities for learning from peers. As stated by Clarke et al. (1986), "it is paradoxical that front-line tutors in learner-centred schemes should themselves have to learn unaided on-the-job and that open learning, as a set of approaches and technologies,

should be so underused for training the trainers and supporting the supporters" (p. 65).

Personal Reflections.

Apart from the tutors, one could question what percentage of the other parties involved with the institution truly understood the philosophy of the distance education system, and all that it entailed. Administrators, coordinators, support staff, students -- how were they instilled with the knowledge and understanding of the system they were supporting? What mechanisms were in place to help them understand this means of studying and learning?

According to the respondents, at the time of writing, it also seemed that the distance education focus of the local institution was diminishing, and that more and more decision-makers were attempting to fit the learning experience into a conventional educational mold. This involved increasing the number of seminar offerings (i.e., face-to-face situations), thus thrusting the tutors back into teaching situations, and eliminating the flexibility of course enrollment, commencement and completion.

What would happen to the tutors with a strong commitment to the concept of distance education if, as was described above, the institution supporting that

concept slowly evolved in a different direction? What would happen to the students whose needs could be met only by individualized distance study within a flexible system? I was left with a number of unanswered questions and the unsettled feeling that distance education was slowly but surely being infiltrated by the structure and limitations of the conventional educational system. Within that spectrum, there would be no need for the mediator of the learning package -- the tutor.

Implications for Practice

As a result of the study, the following implications were identified:

1. The tutor role is a relatively new concept for most Canadians. Most tutors commence tutoring with only their own understanding of the role and its requirements. Where does it start and end? How extensive are the responsibilities of the tutor towards the learner, and towards the institution? Academic coordinators should provide a clear definition of the parameters of the tutor role in the institution, incorporate it in the organizational structure, and make it known to all.

2. The absence of a comprehensive role definition promotes greater individualization of tutor performance, resulting in a low level of consistency between individuals filling that role throughout the institution. This situation does not constitute a problem as long as tutors understand the parameters of the role and feel that they have the resources to deal with the issue as it arises. Paper accountability is one method of trying to achieve greater consistency, but it should be strongly supported by a cooperative feedback system between the factions of the institution.

3. Not everyone can tutor successfully over the telephone. Given that the source of the course content is the package of materials, the role of the tutor falls outside the realm of information provider and more into the realm of motivator/ supporter/ personal contact. Personal qualities that support this aspect of the role should exist in all who are hired to telephone tutor. Those who hire tutors should be skilled enough to recognize these other qualities outside of academic qualifications and to hire accordingly.

4. The telephone tutor supports an independent learning package of materials for a faceless learner. It has been acknowledged that certain skills are

necessary to perform this role. However, when the tutor meets the learner in a face-to-face (i.e., seminar) setting, a number of different circumstances prevail. Primarily, the situation is much more conventional; both students and tutor will correlate that tutor/seminar leader role with that of a teacher. Distance education institutions must define the role of the telephone tutor and the seminar tutor in different ways, and understand the implications of each when hiring tutor staff.

5. All individuals who impact on the distance education programs offered by an institution along with all those who support the system (such as telephone tutors) must understand what it is to learn at a distance, and what constitutes successful telephone interaction. The provision of information sessions about 1) the aspects of distance education which make it different from conventional systems, 2) the mediating components used by the institution, and 3) telephone skills and supportive behaviors, would foster greater understanding of a concept which is still new and different in our country.

Implications for Research

As a result of the study, the following implications for research were identified:

1. A beginning was made in this study to determine how tutors perform their role, given the wide disparity in learners that they support. Much more needs to be done to arrive at firm conclusions about the parameters of support that students need. How much should be provided by the tutors? What does the institution provide?

2. More investigation of institutional monitoring and management of tutors should be conducted.

3. The role of the tutors in enhancing learning and decreasing attrition in distance education is another area for needed research.

4. Methods of encouraging students to be proactive, and to accept responsibility for themselves and their performance, should be identified through research.

5. Further study should identify tutor skills which facilitate adult learning, and support the development of these skills.

6. A method to enable course developers to better integrate the functions of the learning materials and the human support (i.e. the tutors) should be identified and studied.

Overall, it seems that tutors in distance education have to embody a number of diverse strengths; they must be competent, know about adult learning, be extra caring about their students, and meet the requirements of those above them. At the same time, they have to maintain a personal sense of accomplishment in how they perform as a telephone tutor in a distance education system.

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APPENDIX A

Sample Page of Transcript

SAMPLE PAGE OF TRANSCRIPT

D: The focus of this study deals with what it's like to be a tutor and I'd like you to start by responding to that basic question. "What does it mean to be a tutor?"

L: I've never thought of it in those terms, I must say. I guess initially it was an interesting parttime job and I think that parttime work that is intrinsically interesting is hard to find. I had young children and this was one way that I could keep my hand in my field and do some interesting work. Since then, of course, it has become more than that for me. I see it as a profession. I see that it is different from classroom teaching, which I've done. I think that I've had to develop new skills and I still feel that I'm learning which I find interesting and I'm surprised that I still enjoy the work and I think that it's because I'm always dealing with different people on a one-to-one basis. It's always a new challenge and you take into account the individual a lot more than you do in the classroom and you try to adapt. Also, the people themselves are interesting and you get to know them in some way. I often say that I've had many jobs vicariously. You know, I've learneD a lot about what it's like to work in a hospital, to be an RCMP officer, to work in a chicken factory (which I am very grateful that I've never had to do) and so forth, and I find that interesting.

D: That type of information comes out of your telephone discussions, does it?

L: That's right. And I think it may have something to do with two things -- my particular personality and the way I approach teaching and tutoring and the nature of the courses I teach. In one of the courses I teach, they look at their own job and they look at what is motivating about it and what is demotivating so , in doing that, they talk about their job; and in the other course, they have that option as well. They have a project that they can do looking at their own job so again, they do tell me a lot about their job. Even in [course name], they have options of doing an applied question or a theoretical question based on a case. So that opens the gates to discussion about their jobs. Very often, you realize that part of who they are and what they are is involved in their jobs and that becomes part of the discussion. So I've found that interesting and I

APPENDIX B

Sample Page of Daily Journal

Sample Page of Daily Journal

Monday, April 25

Today, I met a tutor from a local distance education institution in the coffee room. She was complaining about the amount of paper work that is expected of her on a regular basis. I wonder if that is common? She has 30 students, and the papers just keep rolling in. She thinks that she is earning every cent of her money.

I've also heard a couple of people mentioning one of the tutors that I interviewed. They were referring to him being overextended in all aspects of his life. I wonder what that does to his tutoring.

Tuesday, April 26

A fellow student said today that she has spent a year writing her thesis. What a horrid thought!

A professor of my research course described a very interesting class exercise which he used this afternoon. He is giving me a good insight into the relationship between the researcher and the product. All of the class members went downstairs and they perceived quite different "total pictures" of the coffee space. The factors affecting our vision are often personal. I'll have to keep this in mind when I do the interviews.

Spoke to my advisor about a concern that my personal bias will affect the interviews. She said that being aware of that fact is most important and to make sure that my questions look at both sides of the picture.

Wednesday, April 27

Interviewed Lori last evening. When I mentioned the low number of tutors that responded to my search for respondents, she mentioned that most have very heavy demands on them at all times, and are reluctant to undertake anything new. What she said after the tape recorder was off was interesting -- that the academics at a local distance education institution formally objected to tutors being referred to as "academic instructors". Instead, the term "telephone, teleconference and seminar tutors along with markers" will be used.